Dear John: The Politics of Belief

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Jun 18 · 39 min read

[1]

I met _____ at a local bar during the first week of our MFA. This marked the beginning of a weekly tradition where we'd reconvene after workshops to process and gossip, but mostly to drink away anxiety. ______ and I were on different sides of the mutable genre fence; he was fiction. I was poetry. He wore an olive green ball cap with "Snake Boots" (maybe a bar in Missouri — I never asked) that disguised the fact that his auburn hair was balding; he was one of the oldest students — an insecurity he tried to make up for through a brash wit, ready ear, and a laugh that traveled across bar tops. He had a presence that was part teddy bear, part cool-guy uncle who never shied away from making cheeky comments that always bordered on the obscene.

We had already started getting to know one another through a group email where we shared short bios. I cringe now thinking of mine, how eager I was to please, how I listed the interests I thought would make me seem the most interesting, hoping to hide the fact that I didn't think I was smart enough, talented enough, etc., to be in an MFA program. Classic imposter syndrome. ______'s bio was the last to arrive:

Hello World- I'm the token geriatric of the class at 40, but I'm glad to see that I share interests with many of you- literature, hiking, record collecting, live music, and beer.

I also love pinball and playing guitar and drums. As for cards, I'm more of a poker type, but I'm willing to learn this Dungeons and Dragons spinoff you all speak fondly of. I do love me some brick, lumber, ore, and grain, so I'm sure I'll be a level twenty wizard with a +10 attack bonus in no time… Excelsior,

The musicality of his humor caught me. When he sat down across from me on the long, picnic benches in the bar, we picked up a conversation as if we'd known each other for years. *Had I heard the new Jack White album? What about The Black Keys?* I knew I'd found a compatriot in this new town. [2]

Late at night, he'd text me to come over & listen to records. His apartment was small and dark — damp because it backed up to a stream that was obscured by thin trees leaning on one another and a cloud of mosquitoes. His loneliness was palpable in the bare dining room and fridge magnets with clipped pictures of anonymous characters. In the beginning, I'd ask for names, their stories, but he was unwilling to divulge their significance except in short bursts. Eventually, I'd learn, though: an estranged long-time girlfriend, a contentious relationship with his father, a previous life in the army. The placement of magnetic frames of lost-loves and friends — emblematic of his idealized worldview where the appearance of freshly christened strangers fabricated a connection to the world that he only felt in rare moments. Every time, I'd move these pictures in different configurations — hoping that a new arrangement could act as constellation, to help us both understand the shadows slowly carving themselves into our psyches.

I was alone a lot. My husband, Brian, traveled for work and in his constant absence I found myself depressed[3] and romanticizing a life where I was untethered from anyone, floating in the dark. I tried to mirror my friends' gestures — smiles with full teeth, heads knocked back in delight, enchanted by their own creativity. When Brian did return home, I was cheerful — tending to a small patio garden of bright orange habaneros, dill weed, cherry tomatoes, and trying new recipes. With so little time together, I didn't want to burden him with what had settled into my skin as a mild buzzing — the pressures of the program like the constant chirping of cicadas mating in summertime: a clamor.

I saved these internal monologues for _____; he'd struggled with depression, too, and understood that most days this sense of suffocation was amorphous — impossible to describe to someone who didn't understand or didn't notice. We were at our best when we stopped thinking; drinking perspiring Lone Stars under a neon sign that made our beers luminous like fireflies. Palms wet from the endless condensation and Texas humidity, even in the winter months; my stomach always hurt from laughter after a night out with him. We exchanged *I love you's* as symbolic of a higher-minded friendship — one where emotional intimacy wasn't reserved only for lovers but for friends, too.

With him, I felt a unique safety. He was nearly 14 years my senior and was always arriving places out of breath, belly pressed tightly against the rows of buttons, unhinging their mouths; his favorite shoes announcing his approach with a pungent blend of sweat and sharp cologne. Often, I knew he'd arrived by the sudden manifestation of heavy breathing behind my ears, a panting. We'd sit anywhere and talk for hours, couples scowling at us from their makeshift paradises, while we howled at one-liners like "he's not interesting enough to hate" or "without sass, she is but a mute." The stream of crass jokes made me feel like I could do nothing wrong. I felt I could be wholly myself around him.

* * *

By spring break, I was ready to collapse into a drunken persona. Luckily, some friends had organized a trip to their lake house in Brownwood, Texas, which made up for its lack of cultural cache by being the perfect setting to drink all day with no judgment from the townsfolk. The backdrop was the color of a russet potato — a result of a longstanding drought and string of fast food chains. Even the sky seemed watered down by the glare of dehydration, bare branches reaching toward the sky for mercy. Late evening came and everyone was wrapped in the soft glow of lantern light out on a large porch that faded into the water, the thin sheen of sweat making our dancing bodies look like receding lines of fireworks. We were running low on cocktails, so I retreated from the crescendo of the party to make more.

The two large French doors that separated the interior from exterior festivities were open wide and swaying gently in the breeze. As I made my way to the kitchen, the voices carried behind me. I was in the midst of trying to make prickly pear beer palatable with Patrón when I overheard _____ declare that I was the *best woman he'd ever met*. I thought it was flattering. I'd never been a part of an artistic community before and was eager to prove that I worthy of long-term friendships. I saw his comment as confirmation that I was building this community, and I felt at peace.

That night was the beginning of the proclamations of love — ones I initially believed were rooted in friendship. A naïve notion looking back. Eventually, I'd see beyond my own desire to belong and look at the cost. I went to bed early but the party filtered in through the diaphanous curtains, the humidity extending each note in Alan Jackson's classic twang. ____'s voice boomed over — I heard my name and nothing else.

* * *

The fear of not being good enough compels me in ways I am uncomfortable with. I'll overlook transgressions out of a misguided belief that if I refuse to make allowances for others I'll be labeled a mean girl,[4] and mean girls don't have friends. So I silence myself, make myself smaller — convince myself my feelings are less defensible, my shortcomings untenable, so that my flaws won't be broadcast. I've learned it's often easier to make these daily allowances rather than swim against the current of microaggressions that say, "loyalty to you is limited by how comfortable you make me." So, I maintain equilibrium.

* * *

In nice weather, we could be found at the local food truck park that was walking distance from campus. All the seating was outside so we'd only meet there in the cooler months, when the flies and mosquitoes didn't nip at the inside of my legs. The crepuscular light glinted off the strings of Christmas lights that weaved in between each of the trucks, settling on the red and blue picnic tables, casting us as graphic novel versions of ourselves. We were discussing a study abroad trip to Ireland that we'd decided to go on together. I was excited to spend five weeks exploring a new landscape, a land steeped in green. Before I'd moved from Colorado, I was told how vast the Texas sky was, but the sky in its blue enormity was becoming a firmament of captivity. It could swallow your vision if you let it.

____ was in the middle of telling me about a girl he'd met a few weeks back, who had "bewitched" him. I'd heard this story before with a number of girls[5] when the harsh vibration against the table marked the arrival of a text. I took a break from shoving pita in my mouth and checked my phone. ____ began firing off questions with a seething lilt that betrayed his irritation: *Who are you texting? What could you possibly have to say to them over me? Are they really more important than me?* I ignored these outbursts — the reverberation of *me*. He reached for my phone to see the recipient. I gripped harder. The air became hot. I held his gaze until he relaxed: "oh, don't get offended, I was joking; you're so easy to rile up."

"We should plan some day trips," I said.[6]

The lights above us swung hesitantly in the wind—electric with possibility.

* * *

The evening was well worn and forgettable.[7] I answered the phone too jovial — certain he wanted to discuss the Kacey Musgraves album he'd lent me on vinyl or my new poem. But, his sentences unraveled like a swimmer rising too quickly — the salt braiding itself into each syllable — catching the throat off guard in its persistence — choking: "My father committed suicide last night."

They hadn't been close — although, in recent history they'd attempted to reconcile. During the few months leading up to his death, ____ would try to call him early in the day, before his father began drinking. He was already on the road to his father's home to pick through his belongings — a vast collection of art that he couldn't afford when living — now ____'s responsibility to sort through in order to pay off his father's debts.

The conversation was short; there wasn't much to say. In my pursuit to find the right words, I found nothing. I didn't know how to cope with the combination of sorrow, resentment, and surprise, so I let him take the lead — hopeful he'd guide me towards the precise language that would help him grieve. It wasn't until much later I'd understand that he took my reticence as a distance I wouldn't bridge — apathy toward his suffering. This transmission was the first rift — a sleeper wave, one that would return with little warning, washing us out to sea.

Despite his father's extensive art and furniture collection, ____ would come back with very little — auctioning off the pieces that'd consumed his father's time and fortune, and eventually, ____. He would never admit it, but his father's death had a profound impact on his demeanor — a once self-deprecating humor was now vitriolic. His gaze once reminiscent of mint leaves in the late-afternoon sun now cool as sea glass.

When ____ returned, I went to his apartment; there was a yellowed envelope on the table. His father had left him a letter. Two years later, he still hasn't opened it — fearful of the imagined accusations or apologies, and more so of what lurks beneath the language, a tide that could kill him through reflection. I can only surmise that he knew how easy it would be to undo his mind with one line — a verdict of culpability he couldn't bear to confront.

* * *

A few weeks later, we were relieved to be out of the humidity and in Ireland, grateful for a few weeks away from the microcosm of the MFA. Once an environment of joy and support, it had recently soured under the strains of creative ambitions.[8] The paradox between the expectations of professionalism and a collective intimacy was taking its toll on all of us; I adopted hermitage while others turned outwards for fraternity.

After several travel mishaps that delayed my arrival by over 14 hours, ____ greeted me at the apartment gate in Cork; in my memory, the threshold was light steel, but looking back at pictures it was actually a deep black. Long after midnight, the street lamps gave the appearance that half of our bodies were on fire. The air was floral and emerald — on the cusp of rain.

The next day, we had to complete a scavenger hunt to get acquainted with the city. It was pouring throughout most of our journey on foot. I had placed myself in charge of navigating because I've always had a solid sense of direction and an overwhelming anxiety that peaks when other people are in control and fucking it up. Most of the other students were barely 18, and didn't know how to read a physical map — a relic from the old world. ____ and I joked that we'd give anything for a Paddy McGPS to guide us quickly through this unknown landscape.

The rain had let up a bit when we got to Daly's Bridge or as the locals call it: Shaky Bridge. It was a white bridge hardly big enough to house two people next to each other. The bridge spans over the River Lee and would be a point of return for those early evenings when Brian wasn't answering his phone and ____ was off with a local girl. I've never been a fan of heights or anything that generally disrupts my already unreliable sense of balance so I huddled close to ____. We took a picture. My hair and jeans were soaked, the gray background making us seem out of place. I looked hopeful. Maybe this was the place I'd overcome my depression.[9] I checked the map, it was only our second stop, but the colors had begun to run together, bleeding over rivers and roads, the pages dissolving into themselves.

Class had let out, and we were getting acquainted with downtown Cork, perusing bookshops, and bouncing from bar to bar, red ale staining my white blouse, tipsy from the immersion into a new culture. It was a Sunday, and there were a lot of street performers out heckling passersby. A man on stilts in an large top hat pointed to ____ with his thick beard and his ensemble of a flannel shirt and khaki shorts and shouted: "oh look — a lumberjack!" ____ looked at me — unamused. He was sensitive about his fashion choices and didn't appreciate the label despite his proclivity for the uniform. I burst out laughing, and couldn't stop. He blushed, and shoved me down another alley, but soon he joined in. His laugh was clipped[10] though, an underlying tenor of curated misery. I liked seeing these edges. I'd become so familiar with these minor splinters that I could have scheduled their emergence. We went down the wrong street, and tried to backtrack to some familiar territory — a food market. The streets began to swell again. He kept smiling. He thought he was fooling me, too.

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Satellite (noun): an artificial body placed in orbit around the earth or moon or another planet in order to collect information or for communication.

* * *

We'd established a routine after our Irish lit class to pick up lunch at the English Market — an 18th century covered market where traders sold organic and locally produced food. My favorite stand was a fish trader who whipped up a smoked salmon spread that was crushed with lemon, dill, and mayonnaise and delicious on local bread. Conversation with ____ had grown monotonous and he made me uncomfortable with daily data dumps about the women in his life — not because there were other women he admired but it was the way he talked about them — how their ass looked in various outfits and other intimate details that agitated me. Sometimes I would look up for the existence of hidden cameras that would indicate I was filming an episode of *Entourage* — cast as the "cool girl," who understood men and their need for locker room talk.[11]

When I tried to tell him (again) that I was troubled by his bombastic judgments of the women around him, I was met with increasing hostility: "Friendships aren't built on boundaries.[12] You can't just decide what you will and won't talk about. That's not what being a friend is." This is where I lost track.

I didn't know what to do with these statements. They confused me in their confidence. Had I gotten it wrong all these years? Scared of the implications, I swallowed agreeably, hoping I could survive the echoes of his despair that tainted everything since his father's death. I felt paralyzed by the reiteration that I needed to be a good friend — that I needed to play nice. Each day, we'd pass the Cork Courthouse — a sculpture of Lady Justice at its apex — her eyes sightless and open.

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He-Said-She-Said (noun): A contentious dispute in which the parties express opposing accounts of an event or situation; an account of such a dispute lacking analysis or concrete evidence.

* * *

I am in seventh grade at Catholic school with awkward chin-length hair and god-awful lemon juice highlights that solidified that my awkward stage would be very real and very well documented. I was sitting in what doubled as my homeroom and math class while my teacher, Mr. Georke, found another opportunity to weave in his musical stylings. Last week was "Arms Wide Open" by Creed, which to this day, I can sing with a nasally insistence that oozes into each phrase and wins over fellow karaoke patrons. The week before Mr. Georke waxed philosophical over Jewel's "Hands": a true arbiter of musical taste.

Math wasn't my strong subject.[13] I was always asking questions — trying to transform my ignorance into some kind of plucky zeal. But I would often resort to quiet confusion rather than face the shame of his head tilting in exasperation, slowing down his explanation to the point of mortification. In the middle of a lecture about fractions, I asked for clarification about a problem on the board. Blatantly frustrated and annoyed, he squared his body to me and said: "you're going to end up just like Monica Lewinsky." The class all turned in unison as if scripted to gauge my reaction. I offered only confusion. I had never heard the name before, but his tone communicated it wasn't a compliment. My face got hot. I sunk into my chair and focused on rewriting my name over and over again. The ink ran dry.

In the car on the way home, I asked my mom the identity of the mystery girl. She didn't answer but stiffened and the air turned rancid; "why do you ask?"

It was the first time I remember seeing motherly rage.

The following week, we met with the administration — a woman who had been there for several years and it showed. She lacked any particular charisma and didn't seem to like children much. Her black eyeliner was smeared in thick lines underneath her lower lashes, and I focused all my attention on it as I braced myself for her verdict: *she must have misheard*. My parents protested. When I approached my class for witnesses, my peers stayed seated — hushed.[14]

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The sea pulsed gunmetal gray as we took a ferry back from the Aran Islands to the mainland. Since I arrived in Ireland, Brian had been distant. Days would go by where we would barely speak. I knew he was busy with summer classes and friends, but I believed my veil of blue had become burdensome. I collapsed into my need. ____ and I sat on the beach, watching the waves, communicating in quiet. I'd dug my heels into the sand and cried in his arms.

On the boat ride home, I laid my head on his shoulder. I closed my eyes and let the rocky waves merge with the sky.

* * *

We were in the laundry room, waiting for a dryer to open up. The smell of synthetic lavender and cotton permeated everything. ____ had met a local girl that he'd developed a crush on. She was nineteen, but that didn't matter because she was "European." He'd even given her a nickname: his "pet rabbit"[15] and was in the midst of detailing the tautness of her physique when I headed for the door. To heighten the drama, the dryer dinged as I ran out. The sun was beginning to set, and the chatter of air conditioners vibrating off the courtyard walls sounded like a chorus of phantoms. I heard the door slam first, and before I could turn, he grabbed my arm to pull me towards him. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I yanked out of his grasp. I reiterated my tired script: "Why can't you respect that I don't want to hear it? You obsess, idolize, and then degrade the womxn you meet. You continue to push me into these talks even when I tell you I'm uncomfortable." The voices got louder around us. I let his response land in the back of my throat, so I couldn't taste it. Something he'd said a few days back came rushing towards me: happiness always comes with a hangover.

He said sorry. I catalogued it but didn't believe it. I walked back to my room amongst the refrain of the air switching off.

* * *

In a recurring dream, there's a ladder in my bedroom. The metal is the kind of black that looks blue in moonlight. I cannot see where it leads to, but I am not afraid. At first, I climb easily but then the rungs begin to shape shift into hands I recognize but cannot identify. I fall.

But I'm not really falling — it feels like lurching between the space of wakefulness and dreaming. I'm belly down on a bed. I can't tell what side of consciousness I'm straddling. Someone has my feet & they're pulling me toward them. I'm clawing at a mattress of raven feathers. They let me go just long enough to pull me back again. I can feel my ankles reddening from their hold. You know what's coming next — it doesn't stop until I wake up.

* * *

"How many loved your moments of glad grace,

And loved your beauty with love false or true,

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face."

"When You Are Old" — W.B. Yeats

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On our last day[16], we walked alongside the River Lee with a rolled-up copy of Yeats and the cheapest bottles of wine we could find. It was midday on a weekday, so there weren't many people out, the rushing water operatic and serene; the weather was tinged with autumn — a somber orange peel wrapped around twilight. We sat down on the grass, slightly wet from yesterday's rainfall, and proceeded to have a boozy picnic. We read each other poems, periodically breaking into tears at their lyric relevance. The wine was awful — an unholy blend of rose, vanilla, and rubbing alcohol, but we drank enough not to care. We were on our own island. Our laughter carried into the empty field beside us — disembodied, our presence hidden by the enclosure of oak trees.

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The matte black night[17] and mild breeze gave the illusion of winter. I was wearing my favorite jacket, leather with long zippers and sharp collar. I walked quickly down the hill from my house to a bar that made up for its lack of atmosphere by once a month offering $2 you-call-it drinks. The road was derelict and the night starless. Cars whizzed by so closely, I could've reached out and brushed them, but in spite of the clear pedestrian hazard, there was no sidewalk or bike lane. From a distance, I must've looked strange swiveling to look over my shoulder, my slender bracelet glowing intermittently — a neon warning.

In recent months, I'd collapsed into my work, but I was beginning to feel ready to socialize again. A group of fellow poets had suggested the bar, and despite the likelihood of ____ being there, it was only a few blocks from my house and the pours were strong. ____ was already there on the outdoor patio, smoking a menthol cigarette and leaning against its frame, his back towards me. It was cramped and noisy on the patio, smoke mingling in the air above us. I hadn't seen him in weeks. After we'd returned from Ireland, I told him I needed space.[18] His jealousy over my friendship with another male friend had provoked him to besiege every boundary I tried to erect. His attention was claustrophobic. His frustration induced drunken calls and voicemails three or four times a week. The limits I'd "unfairly" imposed, entitled him to violate the bounds of my privacy again and again — shaming me into remaining friends. He didn't realize the distance was a lifeline for me. He didn't take the hint.

When he saw me, he smiled widely; I caved, crying out: "Ginger bear!" [19] I gave him a big hug. I'd missed him.[20] I was hopeful; maybe the space had procured clarity.

It was about halfway through the night and the gin and tonic was sorting

It was about halfway through the night and the gin and tonic was sorting itself out in my bones; I was giggly. Above us, the stars remained hooded and speechless. My phone buzzed in my back pocket. ____ stopped talking, his body shifted hostile. Within the span of seconds, he had positioned himself next to me, as if guarding me from outside forces, leering over my shoulder: "who are you texting?"

"I can text whomever I want."

"You're so pathetic."

I didn't leave yet. I should have, but his confrontational body language rendered me immobile. I tried to shrug his accusations off like the jacket that suddenly felt too warm. I focused my sightline on the empty apartments across the street for what-felt-like hours until I overheard him telling someone that I have "nice tits." [21] I told him not to bother calling to apologize. I walked up the hill quickly and alone back to my house, my black cat keychain poised between index and middle finger. He called anyway, not so much to apologize but to tell me what a selfish friend I was, that I was ruining his life, that he was tired of feeling like a monster. I played with the teeth of my coat until I calmed down. By the morning, I'd have three missed calls.[22]

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We were in the same nonfiction class.[23] Before we'd stopped talking, ____ warned me I'd be in his memoir but under what capacity was unclear. I don't remember the exact language but a sentence or two offered the rare glimpse into another's viewpoint: "after my father's suicide, a good friend couldn't handle the weight." He'd marked my absence six months before I'd stopped talking to him and ended our friendship, but his essay showed he doubted my reasons for doing so.[24] At the time, I believed it an unfair judgment speaking to our divergent outlooks — how he always felt the need to quantify his suffering over another's.

He'd forced me to put distance between us, but it'd been a slow ebbing away. I didn't realize that I abandoned people before I claimed it — rolling away like the last beads of water on a back — quietly and seemingly without hesitation.

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Visiting my parents for the holidays, I was unusually quiet on the ride home from the airport while my phone buzzed continuously, incoming emails with only a fragment of a sentence every few minutes — as if composed immediately after initial thought — no filter, unfocused, furious. I had blocked his number back in October when unintelligible voicemails and texts at three, four, five in the morning slurred and upset became unreservedly vindictive. Email was his only point of contact now.

They were repetitive in tone, in accusation: heartless, bitch, disgusting, selfish, enemy. I had abandoned him, which gave him license to lash out. I had rejected him; therefore, these charges were warranted. I tried to calm him down, a plea to act kindly: "For whatever our friendship was, can you just leave me alone? I would never ruin your life out of spite. Even though we aren't friends anymore, I wish you the best."

I didn't know it yet, but he'd started putting a script into motion — reaching out to members of my cohort — cornering them in public places like our favorite bar and after class, places that had once been a source of camaraderie and comfort, to broadcast what I'd shared with him in private.

I only told Brian and my close friend, Michaela, about this initial exchange — I didn't want to draw attention to myself — afraid of what would be exposed, unaware that I already was. Partially, I didn't want to admit failure — that maybe I was unable to retain close friendships — an accusation leveled before — that maybe I was part of the problem.

" Feeling okay?" My dad turned to me as we passed another highway exit sign with more than one identity. I didn't tell him about the threats. I didn't want to make a big deal of them. I faked being carsick. I vomited anyways.

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A few days later, I returned to San Marcos. Something was swarming on the horizon — as I got closer, I recognized the formation: a flock of black vultures soaring above campus, wings outstretched, their hooked gaze fixed downward.

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According to National Geographic, scientists have discovered that salt water can burn if exposed to the right radio frequency: "The radio waves break up the water into its components, allowing the resulting freed oxygen and hydrogen to catch fire." Relentless waves — the afterimage of his father's death — a channel tuned to burn us both.

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I'd tried to keep it friendly in our memoir class, but I still was aware of his forceful glare always visible in my periphery, the resonance of those initial emails like white noise. I smiled. I complimented his essay. I walked quickly back and forth to the bathroom. I still had to keep in contact because I was the interviews editor for our school's literary journal, and he'd offered to write an interview for me a month or two before, a surprisingly difficult feat to obtain publishable interviews from my peers. Most of the time, I ended up writing a few to fill the quota. I was grateful. He had a friend in the literary community. He has a lot of friends. He even founded his own literary journal with the money from his father's estate. In spite of the past few weeks, I still believed I could keep it congenial if only for professional reasons.

Our class had paused for break, and I wasn't quick enough in gathering my things. He tried following me to the bathroom to talk — I put my hand on his chest — the angle blunting the edge of my palm like the backside of a knife. We'd been the last to leave, so we were alone. I didn't raise my voice as I told him: *you betrayed me*. He tried walking around my arm — to get close to me. He knew me well enough to know that my arm could be an olive branch — if he could convince me of his sincerity, if he could figure out fast enough what I wanted to hear. *Don't lie to me.* His voice became ragged: "I didn't share anything about you." I knew he was lying.[25]

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I have this inherent belief in the fairness of the world — an idealized and unrealized perspective that I still haven't shaken myself of despite numerous reminders to the contrary. This belief carries over into my expectations of other people — the hope that people remain impartial until personal experience informs their assumptions and language. It's an outdated mode of thinking, but at the time, it convinced me that after the anger subsided I'd be left with something.

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I'd retreated almost entirely from social events — a practice that would continue for months — preferring to stay home and watch reruns of *Top Chef* then potentially run into ____ and feign indifference. Others took this as passive hostility but I didn't know how to manage this invasion of privacy [26] with the social requirements of the MFA. Michaela had become my social surrogate, going to the bar and relaying the events: "He was there last night shouting about you — but when he tried talking to William and I, William shut him down." A moment of compassion I believed would be the first of many. Perhaps, I expected too much. [27] I wanted people to care more about me than the sensationalism of a good story.

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I keep a Smith and Wesson revolver in my nightstand. Her name is Barbara Gordon — Batgirl (not the Alicia Silverstone version). It was an anniversary present, a means of protection since Brian was gone most of the week. At night, I would practice loading and unloading it, sitting in bed with the lights off, fixing at random points on the wall like a sparkler that's run out — aiming to resurrect the words that'd been there a moment before.

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I'd had to do a lot of heavy lifting to get ____'s interview ready for publication — it'd started at three times over the limit. I was still trying to be civil with ____— my demeanor an act of kindness; although, to him it looked like insouciance. This split of perception between ____ and myself like a shadow cleaved from my body whispering in my ear: "you brought this upon herself."

Three days after the interview went live, I woke up earlier than normal, made a cup of coffee, and stepped outside to avoid waking Brian. I remember the morning as being unnaturally pink, like the air had been slapped. The grackles sitting in the arms of the large maple tree in our front yard only intermittently chirping — too enamored with the settling skyline.

Three new blocked messages. [28] 5 new emails.

It was a unique blend of incredulity and shock. I didn't know who was speaking — who had grabbed the mic. I made Michaela and Brian listen to the voicemails, read all the emails: *Am I making too much of this?* This questioning seems like a particularly female response — a lack of confidence in my reaction — an inability to discern if I'm being unreasonable, because I've been taught to be skeptical of my emotional responses until I receive affirmation of their validity.

The person on the other line, someone who'd unhinged fragments of conversations and fabricated a narrative, was baffling — but mostly devastating: *Had I asked for this?* I considered calling to try to reason with him — but the last voicemail stopped me. [29]

I was restless and scared, so Brian convinced me to report the incident with the University Police Department. The sun had barely risen so I was the only person in the office. I waited anxiously for over a half hour to talk to the officer; the stiff chairs and anesthetic ambiance of the waiting room gave the DMV a run for their money. Finally, they brought me back into a room — the smell of melting Tupperware, lemon pledge, and burnt leftovers greeted me as I sat down at the officers' lunch table. I thought it odd that I was led into their break room. The table was sticky with some unknown residue, so my forearms perched precariously on its edge. The severity of my claims immediately determined ridiculous as indicated by the setting's informality.

I walked the officer through the events of the last few months. He took a few notes. At one point, I asked him if he'd like to hear the voicemails or emails — he said it wouldn't be necessary. I spun my phone around and around on the faux-wooden table — the only indicator of discomfort I allowed. Since ____ and I both taught on campus, he promised he'd tell him to cease communication with me and file a Title IX report.[30] It had been an uneventful interview; I'd been calm and direct. When I relayed the content of the voicemails, my breath was steady and emotionless, my eyes immoveable from the seconds counting down the recording in my head. I wanted to be taken seriously, so I suppressed the tears and anger stirring in my stomach. I knew how to act to be believed.

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When I got back from the UPD office, I had a new text: "I think you should know that ____ called me last night — enraged. The thing that scared me the most was what he was saying about you — I didn't know what he was capable of." By the end of the day, I'd have three similar stories. I didn't ask what he'd said. I didn't have to — I could tell from their vague description of his threats that he'd used his entire arsenal against me. A telephone game of traumatization.

· · ·

A peer told me workshop had gotten combative — meaning some were uncomfortable when I disagreed with the men in the class.[31] And when they contradicted me, I didn't back down. [32] The next week, I stayed (mostly) silent as an experiment. I got big smiles as consolation and no one qualified their statements when they agreed with my critique.

The following week, I opened the discussion. I challenged everyone. I didn't give a fuck.

· · ·

There were three of us with similar complaints about ____'s behavior but I was the only one to detail the entirety of the claims; some insensitive comments from higher-ups had discouraged the others from coming forward. One of the many excuses for his behavior: "he was probably just drunk." [33] The underlying charge was that (insert reason here[34]) bar men from accountability.

Previously denounced for expressing my opinion, now the same womxn lauded that I was willing to stand up. I didn't know what kind of womxn I was expected to be. I did know that it had always been this way, criticized for being outspoken, but in times of crisis, I am expected to be a mouthpiece.

· · ·

I hadn't heard from Officer __________ since I'd filed the report. I needed a status update I could show to my supervisor — a burden of proof. His response was clipped — a solitary line stood out amidst the political jargon: "Mr. _____ explained the situation to me and would stop all communication with you."

____ explained it to him. I hadn't realized my testimony was incomplete, faulty, or somehow not enough.

· · ·

I kept the blinds closed; I kept track of the cars parked outside. I didn't talk to anyone who didn't already know. At the Title IX office: "unfortunately, we can't do anything unless he does something more — since he's not threatening physical violence, there's not much we can do. But call us immediately if you hear from him again."

I told the Title IX coordinator that I was disappointed in the response from UPD, after the Officer unilaterally decided not to file a Title IX. When I got home, a second email from Officer ___________ waited for me; obviously having been informed by the coordinator of my complaints; his defensive tone reaffirmed that anonymity was a privilege: "I spoke with Mr. _____ on 05/15/16 and advised him to cease and desist all contact with you. Mr. _____ explained to me that you both had a disagreement and would stop all communication with you. I did not do a Title IX report because the elements"

That's where it ends. He didn't even finish the email.

· · ·

Excerpt from _____ _____'s Title IX form*:*

Were any of the following involved:

[] Alcohol [] Drugs []Other []Unknown []None [] Substance

_____ _____ University may offer limited immunity for offenses related to the incident when appropriate.

Looking back, I find this ironic, *may offer limited immunity*. What counts as other or unknown? The lack of physicality an inoculation against punishment — but there is still violence here.

· · ·

A month later, I was at the grocery store with Michaela picking up a few things for an impromptu cooking party. I saw him before he saw me — his forest green hiking shoes, his signature walk in cargo shorts. My whole body tensed when we caught eyes and Michaela headed him off so I could slip by — one of the many reasons why she is one of my closest friends. He was asking her how her summer was, how work was going, if she'd started work on her thesis. I rushed to the bakery display. I stared at a country bread loaf and fingered the bottom of my fraying shorts until he left.

Later that afternoon, he called Michaela six times in a row. She was in the shower and didn't pick up until the seventh time when he proceeded to get it off his chest, "I didn't realize what I'd done until I saw her — her reaction to me." His rhetoric reflected an empathy that only accommodated one of us.

I texted one of the other girls to warn her he was back. Her fear let me know that it wasn't all in my head.

· · ·

It's difficult to pinpoint any specific ramifications after the summer but something had shifted — the atmosphere almost milky, like I was viewing each encounter through a veil. I knew it was something I'd partially created — a detachment from my peers by ignoring anything had happened — by pretending everything was fine. This made me seem inauthentic — artificiality I thought protected and sustained me but only led to further isolation. A deleterious cycle: the more I tried to close this distance — the more insincere my gestures came across. Now, when I walked up to a group an awkward silence fell. The static of scattering bodies and a delayed release of cloying sweetness now imbedded in each interaction; I picked up on these changes like signals moving through me. I thought I could save myself through sacrificing myself in service of the collective, but I was no longer a member. I had breached the contract.

A few months before, Brian had quit his job traveling to go back to school. He was pursuing a degree in Electrical Engineering and found hanging out with a bunch of writers at the very least entertaining. He'd started going to the bar on Tuesdays after workshop to relax after a day of studying to hang out with people his own age. ____was there one night and approached Brian: "I'm sorry for hurting her and for the way I treated her. I know that I screwed up and I know that I will never get forgiveness, but I just wanted to tell you. I just wanted her to know."

I wasn't there. This is all second-hand — the fingerprints smudging its intention. It's a hollow gesture — its displacement onto Brian — muffling its meaning. Perhaps, it is emblematic of true remorse but, as it comes nearer, it's form is unmistakable — a muzzle.

· · ·

I was at Rebellion, a bar in Washington, DC, taking a much-needed break from the onslaught of AWP, an annual writer's conference that I was attending as poetry editor for _____ _____. I was with fellow third-year MFA students, and we'd spent all day roaming the endless aisles of the book fair, talking to strangers, attending panels. The bar was loud with bodies so our conversation was sporadic, the overuse of dark wood sucking all the light out — a small kindness to mask our exhaustion. I was sitting across from two of my closest friends, Michaela and William. We were talking shop, which for writers at a conference means going through the books you bought, panels that lived up to their alluring titles and those that disappointed, and what readings we were going to later. Earlier in the day, ____ had come up to the booth while I was working and tried to engage in conversation — he kept saying my name but I pretended not to hear — the most polite option. William was a third-year MFA student like Michaela and me, and we'd been friends since the beginning. Often, our conversations would escalate into heated arguments about random philosophical dilemmas that invigorated and informed our understanding of one another. It was one of the things that attracted me to him immediately. But his moods were erratic largely due to an on-and-off again relationship that had recently soured completely, so he was back on — meaning he wanted Michaela's and my full attention after months of silence. This silence had manifested into William making insensitive but not devastating decisions, like remaining friends with ____ and staying with him during AWP. I didn't have the energy to explain my emotions. The tremors of depression had settled in recent months, and I'd thrown myself fully into thesis preparation and continued to only appear at formal MFA functions to protect myself from the chatter.

William was staying with ____ at an Airbnb because it was convenient and inexpensive.[35] I hadn't brought it up. I knew anger only cast further suspicion onto me. Angry womxn are not listened to. I dimmed and collected the pieces of the narrative to make a mosaic that spoke louder.

When William gets drunk, he has an even greater predilection to argue — about anything — so when he started complaining about how tired he was because of ____'s snoring — I began chewing on my lips. William was one of the ones ____ called *that* night, but since then I'd avoided talking about it. The more I discussed it the more resentful I felt towards those whose lack of reaction condoned his behavior. The more aware I was (am) of the allure of complacency — of the ramifications of disturbing the status quo.

I rolled my eyes at his complaint — a reflex from childhood that's even less charming now that I'm an adult. William faced me and squared his shoulders: "why the attitude?" I sighed — I was a little tipsy and can always attribute my candor to alcohol: "You chose to stay with him." His forehead furrowed; this was not what he was expecting to hear, but he recovered quickly: "you're not going to like this, but men make allowances for one another." My eyebrows rose in mock surprise; he expected his statement to be revelatory, but this is something most womxn innately understand: "yes, at the expense of womxn, your friends. Tolerance is acceptance of his behavior."

He falters: "I didn't know you felt this way." [36]

I almost felt bad for him. Oblivion is violent.

The next day William approached me as I was working the booth, passing out fliers for the program, trying not to spill coffee on my cat newspaper dress. His pace suggested he was eager to talk to me: "So, I talked to my friend Megan last night and she completely agreed with you. I was so surprised. She backed you up immediately and told me I shouldn't be his friend. I was so surprised." It was meant to be supportive, but the tone was penitent. I envisioned a confessional, a lattice partition — the division between our perspectives palpable. He didn't need my forgiveness. He has something much more valuable.

William said he couldn't take the snoring anymore and stayed at our place for the rest of the trip. He was transparent in his pretext, to prove a loyalty that had ceased to matter, that he could be an ally; I'm a good friend. I allowed it.

· · ·

Meanwhile, Brian had made friends with several of his engineering classmates, forming a co-ed study group with a name so cheesy I am forbidden to use it here.[37] Periodically, the university had meetings for different branches within the department, and he wanted to show his support for a few of his female friends by attending a meeting for the Society for Womxn in Engineering. I'd dropped Brian off while I continued to work on last-minute revisions for my thesis manuscript.

While they were waiting to review the meeting's minutes, the leader issued a warning that is all-too-familiar for women in academia: "Unfortunately, we have several men in the department who have a history of harassing womxn, so if a man does something inappropriate to you, it's probably because he is well-insulated in the department, so I recommend you keep your mouth shut and leave your job. If he harasses you, it's probably because he's gotten away with it and will continue to." It is disturbing that this attitude traverses departments, gender, race, culture. It is upsetting that womxn are meant to navigate these treacherous landscapes for fear of repercussions that do not touch our male counterparts.

On our ride home, the moon was almost full but its light was faint — blotted out by the glare of stadium lights on the sweeping clouds.

· · ·

Present Day:

I hear his voice first behind me. I walk more quickly. It's a trick of my ear — he is actually walking towards me. He catches my eye & says hello. I veer off into the nearest hallway and run up the stairs. As I reach the platform, I check back to see if he's rounding the corner. I am acutely aware of how stairways hold my gaze for ransom when looking for ghosts.

Who I am looking for is not clear anymore. It depends on the day — who I attribute the most fault to. I'm scared of the performance of care — how quickly I believe it — how vulnerable it renders me.

. . .

For the past two years, I've built a home in apertures. Squatting in their opening, my crouched form projecting a coiled figure, ready to strike on a wall in front of me, the crisp rattle of a camera loading — a refrain. Who is controlling the lens? Who is grabbing at the light?

. . .

Every Monday and Wednesday, ____ stops by my shared office to smoke with a couple of the MFA guys. Every week — a reminder of the peculiar male ability to quarantine accountability as if it's a specimen between glass slides — barring it from affecting their behavior — only impactful if they remove the cover — if they accept my account — if they honor a womxn as much as a man.

They close ranks.

They're talking loudly — relaying their weekends — the smell of cigarettes drifting underneath the glass door. If I let my eyes lose focus, their profiles become phosphenes — the walls eyelids closing over them, the fluorescent lights blurring, swirling until all that remains of them is a pattern of light — light that only responds to pressure — light that isn't really there.

I refocus. They huddle together like crows picking at seeds — not looking back to consider where husks land.

. . .

Synonyms for "apology": admission, amends, concession, confession, excuse, justification, defense. [38]

. . .

Epilogue:

The following is an email I received from John in November 2017 titled "Everything."

[redacted]

End?

Epilogue Part 2:

He's accepted into a program in Oregon for Creative Nonfiction. Who wrote those recommendation letters? I know of one: a highly prestigious white male writer who writes about war and its long runway.

I wrote a letter to the acceptance committee but never heard back.

Epilogue Part 3:

Natassja Schiel finds her father. A direct quote: "I am sincerely sorry that Natassja feels this way and that I ever made her or anyone else feel uncomfortable."

I think what he meant to say is I don't suffer any consequences.

Epilogue Part 4:

A news article from KVUE comes out in 2019, that details Texas State's handling of sexual misconduct reports: "At least 40 Texas State University employees filed sexual misconduct complaints between 2015 and 2019, according to an open-records request filed by KVUE investigative reporter Brad Streicher. Only nine of those resulted in a violation."

Who were these *lucky* few?

Epilogue Part 5:

2020: The Year of Kenopsia and Living Through the Miasma. His journal is up and running again. There's a contest judged by three prominent writers and there's a familiar face (see epilogue part 2). I start to scream.

. . .

[1] This is not a "divorce story." This is a story that investigates the feminine winding around male responses and emotions. This is a story where context is not for consumption. This is a story that accommodates and critiques feedback from a graduate workshop demarcated by quotation marks, unless otherwise indicated. This is a story in the margins.

This is a story.

[2] I know what you're thinking; men and womxn can't be friends — but we were, for a time.

"Were romantic feelings ever reciprocated on the speaker's end?" No. I have to explain more clearly, more directly, more convincingly than, "our relationship was platonic." I have to persuade graduate students, faculty members, men and womxn that I'm telling the truth. Even then, there's a seam of doubt in their questions — examination of a word choice, the significance of a color, indicating a suspicion of some hidden meaning that "perhaps, the narrator isn't aware of." Am I being honest? Why are womxn tasked with proving both authenticity and innocence? I'm unworthy of compassion unless I can establish *I did not have sexual relations with that* ________________. I need documentation. I need exhibits. I need a man to say: "her experience is valid."

[3] I hadn't yet stumbled upon my maternal lineage of depression, a pre-disposed biological hurdle — one that, too, I've learned requires proving. "Depression has to be diagnosed." Read: You must have proof.

[4] "I know who the mean girls are." Read: you're selective with the company you keep. Read: When I finally raise the curtain, I panic that I'll be misunderstood, so I leave it down. Read: I don't let a lot of people in. Read: Womxn are expected to leave the door open.

[5] Singularity often breeds repetition of rhetoric. She was beautiful, captivating, talented, etc., as if these were difficult things to find in a number of womxn.

[6] "Why didn't the speaker confront him?" The body has three responses to fear: fight, flight, freeze.

[7] Before these calls became a regular occurrence.

[8] My workshop receives a lecture on community — people aren't attending events, people aren't friends with everyone — the confusion of proximity and friendship a frustrating and unrealistic responsibility — one placed squarely with the womxn of the program. Men are afforded destructive personas; womxn are selfish. I kept looking around the room, trying to gauge whether I should feel fault for focusing on writing. At one point, the gaze settles on me: *I know who the mean girls are.*

[9] In the midst of deep crisis, I tend to collapse in on myself — entrusting only one or two people to divulge my hidden life. I do this to sequester my vulnerability, fencing it in with those who can use it against me. I rarely received this discerning attention, my boundaries mistaken for walls, strength confused for invulnerability. This attention offered to more visibly fragile womxn — the ones who live by it, the ones who weaponize it.

[10] In my experience, laughter introduces complications. In the best circumstances, it leads to a kind of protective silence. At its worst, laughter dovetails into contempt for the secret attitudes it belies. Laughter imbedded itself into our blood-lined throats until we rebuked its source, spilling the looming behind its curtain.

[11] There were no cameras, but if there had been, you would've seen bodies revolving, positioning, squaring off.

[12] "The narrator needs to establish clearer boundaries." The duty of erecting a narrator that can be sympathized with is a contract with the audience. Her innocence is tied to control of her body — its perception an impartial third-party. Everything is up for contention because her body is in play. The translation of the private into public doesn't end on the page: a performance of the speaker's good manners and best intentions becomes silence — no, she is rendered silent.

[13] *See* stereotype threat.

[14] Belief has to be earned.

[15] Gross.

[16] This would be the last happy memory I have of ____ and I.

[17] This was the last night ____ and I would hang out.

[18] The final straw (as so often is the case) was a combination of factors, of vignettes, of phrases. I stopped responding to his attempts to manipulate me into surrendering access. I didn't want his devotion. And when I didn't budge, he started talking. I wouldn't learn this till later.

[19] A nickname I'd given him long ago after extensive analysis and documentation of his homoerotic appeal; he not-so-secretly hated the name, but I loved it.

[20] This would never change.

[21] *When* my body is up for discussion depends on power. Read: a power play.

[22] Transcript: "I'm going to leave the program. You were my only friend here. I have nothing here" or "I'm going to leave the program. You were my only friend here. I have nothing here."

[23] "Why didn't the speaker avoid him?" Read: You put yourself in this position. Read: You could've stopped the flood. Read: You didn't want to badly enough.

[24] Did you know? When someone makes you question your perception, your line of thought, your sanity on paper. You can feel your lips turn to ash. You can taste the gasoline in your mouth.

[25] "How do you know he was lying?" I knew. Would you like proof?

[26] "____ was out at the bar last night talking about you — loudly. He was sharing a lot of personal information. I just thought you should know."

[27] No, I wanted someone to side with my position without an explanation.

[28] His accusation in summary: That, I, A) held a personal vendetta against him and; B) had used my power to sabotage him by distorting his intentions, and slandering his name: "Take it down or I will call Brian and tell him everything I know about you. You have tarnished my professional reputation with the editorial rape that you did to my interview. This is war."

[29] "This is going to be a major issue. Fuck you and fuck you and fuck you. You are a fucking cunt."

[30] Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex can include sexual harassment, rape, and sexual assault.

[31] I disagreed with womxn, too. However, the men were more vocal in their critiques — afforded the capacity to dissent with no consequence.

[32] I was "hostile." The impression of womxnhood is in the rhetoric. The first three synonyms for hostile are unfriendly, unkind, bitter. Read: you're a threat.

[33] He didn't mean it. He didn't mean to make you feel bad. He's going through a hard time. I am lying.

[34] Substances, female sexuality, being female/femme/butch, you were too opinionated, it was a misinterpretation of intent, "was she leading him on?" Alternately, these are the pretexts for holding womxn accountable.

[35] Perhaps, for him.

[36] When will men hold each other responsible, free of entreaties by womxn?

[37] Trust me, it's good.

[38] Read: This apology is not for me. It's for the apologist. It always is.

81 claps

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